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Dear Mr Townsley

Ofsted survey inspection programme – religious education and citizenship

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Scott Harrison on 20 and 21 November 2007 to look at work in religious education (RE) and citizenship.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE the visit had a particular focus on the subject's contribution to the promotion of community cohesion. In the case of citizenship, as well as looking at the ways in which the school has implemented citizenship in the curriculum, we were particularly interested in any evidence of provision for the part of the programme of study concerned with Britain's diversity.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons in both RE and citizenship.

### Religious education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

#### Achievement and standards

Standards in RE are broadly average and the achievement of students, while variable, is good overall.

- Students arrive in the school with prior attainment in RE which is just below average. By the end of Key Stage 3 standards are above average. While results in the GCSE full course in 2007 were well below the national average, achievement was satisfactory.

- The small cohort of students who took the GCE AS and A2 examination in 2007 achieved well and those currently in Year 12 and 13 are also making good progress in, for example, their understanding of the nature of ethical argument. Students taking full course GCSE in the current Year 11 are making satisfactory progress.
- Students currently in Years 9 and 10, following a GCSE full course, are making good progress in acquiring the appropriate knowledge and understanding required by the examination syllabus. Their progress is less secure in relation to acquiring the skills of analysing moral and philosophical issues and linking these to the study of religious perspectives.
- Standards by the end of Key Stage 3 are above average with over 80% of students attaining level 5 or above. While students make good progress across the key stage, the pattern of achievement is not evenly represented across all aspects of the subject. Where students' achievement is good, they demonstrate a broad knowledge of key features of a range of religions and an understanding of a number of key issues linked to the study of religion and human experience. Their ability to explain and use some of the key concepts involved in the study of religion is less well-developed, as is their deployment of some of the higher order skills of investigation, interpretation and analysis when exploring religions.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is generally good and, on occasions, very good. Students enjoy the subject, see its relevance and enjoy debating and discussing issues. They value the opportunity to develop their understanding of diversity. This interest is reflected in, for example, the growing number of students now opting to take the subject in the sixth form. Behaviour in lessons is very good and students collaborate well together and show respect for the opinions of others. There is scope to extend the degree to which the subject develops their skills as independent learners.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good overall.

- There is a high level of consistency in the good quality of a number of key features of teaching. Lessons are well planned and highly structured and incorporate strategies designed to engage students' interest in their learning. Classes are always very well organised and managed. Relationships with students are good with great care taken to promote good behaviour and positive attitudes towards learning.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and use exposition well to promote understanding and encourage discussion. A good range of lively and engaging resources, including ICT, are used well to support the learning. Some good use is made of questioning to promote thinking and to check that students understand their learning. Lessons are structured to ensure activities match the needs of many of the students. However, sometimes there is insufficient challenge to extend the more able. Homework is set on a routine basis and often makes a positive contribution to learning. Books are marked regularly and

carefully, although occasionally some key literacy weaknesses are not pointed out.

- Teachers are working hard to try to ensure that a balance is struck in GCSE classes between meeting the demands of the examination and encouraging students to engage meaningfully with the material they are studying and extend their skills as learners. At present, however, this balance is not always secured.
- The assessment arrangements in the subject are good overall. Work at GCSE and GCE level is marked regularly with careful attention to the examination criteria although there is scope to extend the opportunity for students to apply these themselves. At Key Stage 3 a series of key assessment points have been identified and care is taken to draw together evidence from across the range of each student's work when coming to a judgement about their attainment level. While the learning objectives and assessment activities are not always linked carefully enough to the levels of attainment, judgements of student attainment are generally accurate.

### Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good overall although there is some unevenness of quality in Years 7 and 8.

- The provision for all students to follow a full GCSE course is a strength of the provision. However, the need to meet the requirements of the syllabus on a fairly tight time allocation in mixed ability classes can, on occasions, limit the scope to allow students to engage more deeply with some of the issues under consideration. The choice of examination syllabus is helping the school deliver aspects of citizenship although this needs to be carefully audited against the requirements of the citizenship curriculum. In addition to the increasingly popular A level provision, there are opportunities for all sixth form students to explore religious and moral themes as part of their wider tutorial programme.
- The curriculum in Years 7 and 8 is a blend of thematic and issues based units of work. This pattern is not entirely coherent or progressive. The pattern across the two years does not always secure the development of the key skills of learning in the subject. Work on Christianity, for example, is not structured in ways that enable students to draw their learning together coherently. The programme of units is based broadly on the requirements of the 1996 locally agreed syllabus which is now replaced by a revised syllabus to be implemented in full from September 2008. This will provide an important opportunity to review the current provision.
- There is a growing provision for curriculum enrichment through a programme of visits, including one to a holocaust memorial centre which students value greatly. At present the visits are linked solely to the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject is led by a very experienced and highly committed head of department who sets high expectations. She has raised the profile of RE and successfully expanded examination provision in the subject. The department receives strong support from the senior leadership team.
- The department is very well organised and managed on a day to day basis; for example, the assessment arrangements introduced in Key Stage 3 are very straightforward and manageable. RE benefits from a very strong team of subject specialists and is very well resourced with good access to ICT facilities.
- Effective use is made of data to analyse students' achievement and there are effective systems to monitor the quality of the provision. Improvement planning is extensive and carefully linked into wider whole school priorities.
- While the department is linked into wider local authority support, it has to date received limited guidance about the process of implementing the newly revised locally agreed syllabus.

## The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

The subject makes a good contribution to many aspects of community cohesion. The subject promotes a positive attitude towards diversity. While the teachers are not reluctant to consider issues about religion in the contemporary world, there is scope to be more proactive in engaging in these matters. Students are interested in, and show respect for, differences of opinion and they value the opportunity to explore different beliefs and ways of life. There are good planned opportunities for the younger students to use resources in the local area and beyond to enrich learning and promote community cohesion and the action plan recognises this as a priority for further development.

## Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in RE is good. Students who receive in-class support make good progress. Most classes are mixed ability and the teaching successfully structures the learning to ensure all make progress. However, the demands to teach the GCSE full course on a very tight time allocation, means the teaching strategies do not always ensure there is enough opportunity for more challenging independent learning to extend the more able. While overall students make good progress in RE, girls' achievement is generally better than that of boys.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- extending the opportunities for more able students to engage in more independent and challenging learning

- developing, in the context of implementing the revised locally agreed syllabus, the pattern of continuity, progression and assessment in the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- monitoring carefully the impact of the new GCSE arrangements on standards and on the ability of the subject to extend pupils' skills as learners
- extending the opportunities to use fieldwork and visitors to support awareness of diversity and promote community cohesion.

## Citizenship

The overall effectiveness of citizenship was judged to be satisfactory.

### Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in citizenship are satisfactory overall.

- Students at Key Stage 4 have satisfactory knowledge and understanding of citizenship across a range of themes. Students' knowledge and understanding is weaker in Key Stage 3 although they have a good understanding of aspects of diversity and some experience of enquiry and communication, for example regarding the countries of the European Union. Some work has been done on aspects of campaigning, for example designing posters, but in general the written outcomes from work in citizenship are modest in this key stage.
- Students generally made good contributions to discussion in classes. They particularly enjoy this aspect of the subject both when it occurs in the context of RE lessons and on some of the days when the timetable is collapsed for personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE). They have reservations about some of these days when activities were less interesting to them.

### Quality of teaching and learning of citizenship

The quality of teaching and learning observed was good overall.

- Good lessons were observed, characterised by interesting starters, well planned activities with good and topical resources, and time for students to explore their ideas together and discuss issues as groups and as a class.
- There was evidence of some weaker teaching, with lower expectations including use of worksheets which restricted open responses.
- Students evaluate their own work regularly but there is as yet no formal assessment of their progress in citizenship. Form tutors report to parents on the basis of their own broad assessment outside the GCSE course.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum in citizenship is satisfactory overall.

- Students in Year 11 are following the GCSE short course although it is not intended that they should take the examination. Students in Year 10

are following the full RE GCSE course which includes elements that have potential for work in citizenship and could, if well developed, provide a core that meets National Curriculum requirements.

- In both key stages students have PSHCE days when the timetable is suspended. In Key Stage 4 these usefully augment the GCSE courses. In Key Stage 3, for lack of such a core, the citizenship curriculum is incomplete and lacks coherence.
- Some successful PSHCE days, for example on aspects of diversity, show what is possible; but as these five days per year also provide for sex and relationships education, careers and enterprise, there is not the capacity for a complete programme.
- Particular departments including geography and English make substantial contributions to citizenship, recognised as such by students. More broadly, however, subject schemes of work suggest that potential links to citizenship have not been fully understood, and this aspect could well be revisited as the school considers its response to the revised National Curriculum.
- The school council offers an opportunity for participation and responsible action. The council has some achievements to its credit but the potential for citizenship education is not yet fulfilled. The election of representatives is unsystematic and sometimes undemocratic; tutors give varying support for representatives in discharging their duties; and, the council's remit is unclear. As such it does not yet have the status in the school that it might aspire to.

## Leadership and management

Leadership and management of citizenship are satisfactory with good features.

- You and your senior management team have taken citizenship seriously both in the curriculum and through other initiatives such as the Stephen Lawrence Education Standard. Developing awareness of cultural diversity has been identified as an area of particular need and has been well supported.
- The two citizenship coordinators have brought energy and enthusiasm to their work, in particular undertaking the extensive planning for the PSHCE days. They have also carried out a substantial audit to promote support for citizenship for subjects across the curriculum. They evaluate provision well and have identified current areas requiring development including aspects of government and law in Key Stage 3.
- Coming from different subject backgrounds, the subject coordinators have done well to develop their understanding of aspects of citizenship, but this needs to be deepened to help them take the subject and its assessment arrangements forward within the context of the revised National Curriculum.

## Teaching and learning about Britain's diversity

This is a good feature of the work of the school. The audit and planning to meet the Stephen Lawrence Education Standard provided the school with a good evaluation of provision. Both in PSHCE and in citizenship, students have

developed their understanding of different identities in the local community and further afield and this has been well supported in other subjects including geography and RE. In particular, students involved in the PSHCE day on Islam considered this to be important in developing their understanding of diversity.

## Inclusion

There was no evidence to suggest that any groups of students were provided for less well than others. Boys in one lesson showed initial reluctance to join in discussion but gained the interest and motivation in the lesson's content to make a worthwhile contribution. Due attention was paid by teachers to the capabilities of students in the arrangement of groups and distribution of resources and tasks. More needs to be done to challenge higher attainers in some lessons and activities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- evaluating the new RE GCSE to ensure that it has the capacity to provide students' National Curriculum entitlement to citizenship in Key Stage 4
- providing a stronger core for citizenship in Key Stage 3, reconsidering the effectiveness of PSHCE days and cross curricular contributions as they develop
- providing further professional development for subject coordinators, possibly through a Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded award bearing course
- promoting consistently high standards of teaching
- developing the assessment of students' achievement in citizenship.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE and citizenship in the school.

As we explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and, in the case of RE, to SACRE and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine  
Her Majesty's Inspector